

THE POLITICS OF “CRAZY-MAKING” AND CONTROL: A REFORM TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

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Charlotte Gilman’s seminal work “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) highlights one woman’s descent into forced, societal madness and serves as a warning to all of us in the practice of educational reform. You may ask what Gilman’s woman has to do with reform movements, or more specifically school reform movements. I say, plenty. What lies most at stake in this story are the unseen truths and sufferings of our protagonist—a woman demurred to the point of silence and ultimately obscurity. Her prison-bedroom becomes the place where her once brilliant and creative mind rots. Her husband, her captor. Her insights left languishing with the shreds of torn wallpaper and her conversations with her Othered Self become her company. During my 13-year tenure as a reformer-educator, Gilman’s narrative hit the center of my soul in its accuracy. Gilman’s critique of the societal and institutional oversight of a captive body, whose autonomy is limited and fenced by paternalism, can be used to effectively highlight the plight of teachers in the current climate of school reform in so-called “inner city” areas.

Like the unnamed protagonist, a young mother and writer, I, as a young educator, was initially emboldened by hope and naivety. However, trying to balance the resistance to my body politics and the rules of engagement forced upon me in schools set the stage for an inevitable collision. I faced the devastating reality that a Queer-White-Radical-Feminist-Survivor-Teacher heralding liberation learning was not a valued commodity in schools.

Teachers who seek to break structures, who challenge, or create new paths and lines of vision will understand the absolutely heart-breaking, crazy-making isolation that our American School Industrial Complex truly unloads on the resister. We are relegated to our classrooms, just as Gilman’s main character is locked in a dilapidated nursery that hopefully once housed happy children. Her husband, best paralleled to the benevolent reformers on high, armed with the latest “knowledge” and oppressive in his paternalist actions, continually fails to see, to hear, to appreciate, to laud, to make space for his wife’s outsider intellect and lived experiences. She tries to talk to him, to reason with him, to get him to allow her to see her friends, but he will not relinquish control, saying no and convincing her it is in her best interest.

Berkley Professor David Kirp, in his book *Improbable Scholars* (2013) details how reform models that oppress teachers are time and again shown to be short-sighted and ineffective. Kirp echoes what every reform teacher already knows: urban school districts whose administrators engage in dictatorial, fear-based approaches fail. Those that choose the “Fire and Hire” approach and a “Teachers Are the Problem” perspective fail. Districts that rely on Teach for America volunteers, who are notoriously under-trained outsiders, rather than on local community members and licensed, highly-trained professionals, fail. And the establishment of charter schools, which siphon money from their public school counterparts and deny students and families access through disadvantageous lottery systems, also cause districts to fail. At the root of these problems lies our explicit and implicit controlling mechanisms.

Now back to Gilman’s woman, her husband and poor Jennie, the maid, a role filled in our analogy by school-based administrators (principals, and vice principals tasked with implementing districts’ oppressive policies). Let us compare this room with the classroom and the unseen knowledge emanating from within these unfortunate confines. Most teachers spend their day in one room. We might visit the teacher’s room for lunch or pop out to go to the bathroom quickly between classes, but really our classroom becomes the only place in these systems that feels safe. We become so connected to our rooms that a part of us never leaves. Like Gilman’s captive woman, our noblest parts of self creep behind the rotting plaster—the Othered self on the outside, looking in. On particularly difficult days, I would become enmeshed in my daydreams, hoping for a different life for me and my students. I would stand captivated by the Boston skyline—hovering miles beyond our prison-school, a seemingly parallel world. My heart ached with the dream that one day I could make real changes and not just have to swallow another type of reform that never really released us from policies of containment. I’ve spent years in basement classrooms with no windows and in buildings

with cockroaches and rats scurrying the hallways and moldy bathrooms. I know that truth is often revealed in the most dire of places. But the revelations, the community, the bravery that arise morph these spaces into sanctuaries of resistance. Teachers understand that true ideas of reform come not from intense, minute regulation but rather an invigorated, loose, adaptable framework led by unlikely leaders. A re-modernization that seeks to bring the radical meaning of education to the communities that hold much of our societal insight. However, these teachers are not heard. Our attempts at dialogue are answered with more regulations: sending us back to stare at our metaphorical wallpaper. And as the reader comes to realize that the prescriptions to treat Gilman's woman are, in fact, the root of her sickness, we would do well to see the connection to what happens to teachers enduring oppressive conditions year after year. Gilman's woman's husband did not listen to her, and few listen to teachers.

Nonetheless, at least teachers have company. My students were my greatest reform allies. We engaged in mutual curriculum development based on state frameworks, in addition to their interests, passions, and personal stories of struggle and success because good curriculum is a living document. Each year, I delved into different paths of discovery depending on the students in my class. The students' courage and willingness to make themselves vulnerable created unique opportunities. Identity politics were front and center. We dared to make room for the most uncomfortable stories, almost as you build a community of survivors in a therapeutic process. I was emboldened and pushed by these young people. The problem is that I inhabit the margin along with Gilman's woman, and every other reform teacher. Institutional reform movements are only able to diagnose what is lacking, because they cannot incorporate the knowledge that is already present. I know I am not alone in being systematically silenced.

Students are also stuck, denied the dignity of self-determination. They move from room to room during the day, following the sound of signal bells, asking for permission to take care of the most basic of needs. However, truly liberating education is about exploration. The human rights value of freedom of movement is quintessential to this journey. The myriad of reforms for populations and communities labeled as "the inner city" are all variations of containment strategy. French post-structuralist philosopher and historian Michel Foucault called out the regulatory scheme of schooling stating that schools define, classify, control, and regulate people in the same manner as prisons and mental institutions (1977). Relations between systemic reformers and students and families are paternalistic at best. Whatever changes proposed are ordered to take place within the confines of the school, within each teacher's classroom. Reform teachers, trapped in the classrooms, know how to build community; they know how to make changes; they know what is needed. Testimonies from reform practitioners need to be studied. And these studies from the margin must be the ones influencing our policies.

Society needs to turn a critical eye to how oppressive tactics fail America's teachers and students. We need to analyze the lens through which we conceptualize the problem of our failing schools. Our school systems need to commit to an anti-institutional approach, be willing to put critical education theory, critical race theory, and *gasp* even feminist and queer theory, into play. To inject them wholeheartedly into our K-12 schools. When we create new policies, we need to embrace creative curriculum building, allow for freedom of movement, and welcome the inclusion of reformer teachers' testimonies of on-the-job silencing and oppression.

Additionally, teacher training for urban schools needs to be revamped so that benevolent intentions and a good heart are not the bulwark of preparedness. Every teacher entering struggling schools needs to be trained to engage in intellectual warfare- to bring these ideologies and scholars to life in the places which understand and live these realities the most. Teachers who work with oppressed youth must understand on a visceral and personal level what oppression feels like. Gone are the days when missionaries save and paternalistic educational practices go unchallenged. Our schools are a mirror-image of the problems that fill our homes and spill out into our streets and public venues.

Simply put, this does not have to be the case. Our urban schools can be the places where America shines—true bastions of 21st Century diplomatic skills in practice. Antagonist "reformers" in less privileged contexts are instigators of wars. We need to find the in-between: processing and confronting systems of control without engaging in violence. We need to relinquish positional authority and embrace a collective sense of power where administrators, teachers, students and families sit equally at the table—all willing to go the distance of a reconciliation hearing.

In closing, true reform will not be possible until we are absolutely committed to the path of self-awareness, compassionate accountability, community collectivity, and bringing forth the beauty of marginalized peoples. Do not be afraid of the "crazy" reformer teacher creeping in her classroom. In the "long smooches" (Gilman, 1892, p. 654) we leave behind a trail toward liberation and change. Reformer teachers know what they are talking about. It is time we listened.

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